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171643Z Dec 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 007042

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2014

TAGS: PGOV PREL TU I2

SUBJECT: TURKS REACH OUT TO IRAQI SUNNIS, URGE THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL FUTURE OF IRAQ

Classified By: DCM Robert S. Deutsch for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (U) This is an action request. Please see para. 10.

¶12. (C) Summary: Turkey is reaching out to Iraqi Sunni groups and urging their participation in January elections and in forming a democratic Iraq. The GOT hosted a delegation from the Islamic Council of Sunni Foundations Dec. 15-16, and has also reached out to the Iraqi Islamic Party. The Sunni council delegation told the Turks that some coalition actions have hurt Sunnis deeply, but they are--in the Turks' opinion--ready to consider participation in the political process and to cooperate with the coalition and ISF. The delegation told the Turks they were aggrieved that some 70 imams (they claim) were victims of false arrest. We cannot evaluate from here the bona fides of the group the Turks entertained (nor their request), but Turkish outreach to Iraqi Sunnis is genuine and we should try to support their efforts. End summary.

¶13. (C) MFA Director General for the Middle East Oguz Celikkol called in DCM on Dec. 17 to brief us on Turkish efforts to reach out to Sunni groups in Iraq. He specifically reported that on Dec. 15-16 Turkey hosted a delegation from the Islamic Council of Sunni Foundations. (NOTE: We cannot be sure of the name, which was translated from Arabic to Turkish to English. Celikkol verified that the group was not/not the Muslim Ulema Council, about which Embassy Baghdad has previously reported. If needed we can go back for further clarification and pass the Arabic name on to Embassy Baghdad. END NOTE.) Celikkol said that under Saddam the organization had come under the Iraqi "Ministry of Foundations." The group claimed to control 900 mosques and masjids (which Celikkol described as "smaller mosques") and 9,000 imams in Iraq.

¶14. (C) Celikkol added that Turkish parties will also provide party development and campaign training for 20-25 members of the Iraqi Islamic Party, and that the party will also set up a representative office in Istanbul. We were also told by the MFA Iraq Desk this week that the Public Administration Institute for Middle East in Ankara will offer a crash course on elections for Iraqi Sunni political parties.

¶15. (C) Celikkol said that Council representatives and Turkish officials had frank conversations regarding the elections and the political future of Iraq. Though Council members at first appeared determined to boycott the upcoming elections, Turkish officials strongly urged them to reconsider and reminded them that a Sunni boycott would only hurt this population. Though the Dec. 15 deadline for party registration for the election had passed, GOT officials urged the Council to review the current candidate lists, pick one of their choosing, and then campaign on its behalf. According to Celikkol, the Turks' efforts "made headway" with the Council members.

¶16. (C) However, Celikkol said, Council members complained to the Turks that certain coalition activities had made Sunni participation difficult. The delegation claimed that:

--Coalition bombing of cities had put Sunnis on edge and made their lives very difficult;
--Killing of people in mosques by CF had "infuriated" the people; and
--CF search mosques disrespectfully, wearing combat boots and using dogs. They claimed more than 50 mosques were so searched throughout the country.

According to Celikkol, the Sunni group was especially upset about CF operations in Abu Hanife Masjid and Imam Azam Mosque. The Council members told the Turks they are ready to cooperate with the coalition to search the mosques. DCM responded that the coalition as much as possible has worked with ISF to take the lead in searching mosques, and that we have worked hard to be respectful of Iraq's mosques and holy sites.

¶17. (C) The Council also claimed to the Turks that the coalition has arrested about 70 Sunni imams without providing reasons. The Council delegation told the Turks that they had only been arrested because Shia rivals made false complaints

to the authorities, claiming the imams were connected to terrorism. The Council claimed it had provided lists to both IIG and Coalition Forces, but that no information on the status of the imams had been forthcoming.

¶ 18. (C) Celikkol--who was careful not to say that he believed everything the delegation had told him--told the DCM that "our impression is that (the Council) is ready to cooperate with you and the ISF." He said they are ready to talk to the USG directly. He added that the Turkish Embassy in Baghdad could help establish this contact if necessary. However, he said that a "goodwill gesture" such as releasing some of the detained imams would help build confidence. He added candidly that such a gesture would also increase the Turks credibility with this group, and thus serve to increase Turkish ability to press Sunnis to participate in the political process. Celikkol said that Turkish links to religious Iraqi Sunni groups go back to the Ottoman Empire, and added that these groups are looking for friends now.

¶ 19. (C) Celikkol said that Turkey will continue to reach out to Iraqi Sunnis and try to convince them to be part of a democratic Iraq. The GOT has instructed its embassy in Baghdad to learn more about certain Sunni groups and possibly invite them to Turkey for talks. Celikkol requested that we let him know if we have identified certain Sunni groups we would like the Turks to cultivate. DCM responded that we will report this and the requests of the Sunni delegation to Washington and Baghdad.

¶ 10. (C) Action request: We cannot evaluate from Ankara the bona fides of the Islamic Council of Sunni Foundations nor its request to release certain imams (if in fact their story is even accurate). We do believe, however, that Turkish outreach to the Sunnis is genuine and part of their overall Iraq policy that matches ours: a whole, free, democratic Iraq. Thus we request that Baghdad and Washington evaluate the Turks' request regarding the imams and also about the Council's apparent offer to meet us face-to-face (if they do not do so already). We also request that if there are other Sunni groups that we would want the Turks to try to influence, please work with the Turkish embassy in Baghdad or with us to put the two together.

¶ 11. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.
EDELMAN